

International 2002). This species is listed as Vulnerable (Birdlife International 2007) because its population is undergoing a rapid decline as a result of widespread degradation and disturbance of lowland rivers and lakes. The Indian Skimmer is confined to Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. A large proportion of the population of this species winters in Bangladesh, principally in the Padma-Meghna delta, and Myanmar. It is a rare visitor to Nepal. It was formerly widely distributed across the Indian subcontinent, along the major rivers of Myanmar, and along the Mekong in Indo-China. In India its distribution range is mainly confined to the River Ganga. It has declined in India and Pakistan (Birdlife International 2007). As per the published account, from West Bengal it has been recorded from the Buxa Tiger Reserve (Allen *et al.* 1996) in the Jalpaiguri district, from the Farakka Barrage in the Malda district (Jha 2006; Sharma 2001) and from the Chattaranjan Bara Dam in the Burdwan district on January 30, 2003 where nine individuals were recorded (Bombay Natural History Society 2007).

From January 26-28, 2007, I went to Purbasthali-Ganga Islets for a survey on waterbirds. The Purbasthali-Ganga Islets situated in the Burdwan district is adjacent to Nadia district in West Bengal. The vast riverine tract of Purbasthali is located close to Kasthashali in Chupi Char along River

Ganga. This wetland complex is actually a cluster of riverine isles, ox-bow lakes and river channels. A large number of migratory waterbirds, especially waterfowl are found here.

As the Indian Skimmer is a Vulnerable species, here I give recent sight records. On January 26, 2007 at 1220 hrs I noticed four Indian Skimmers resting along the riverbank at the Nidoya Char. Further upstream of the river at 1345 hrs two individuals were sighted hovering above the waterline at the Rajar Char. On January 27, 2007 at 1150 hrs two individuals of this species were sighted at the same spot at the Nidoya Char. On the same day at 1410 hrs at the Rajar Char a group of four individuals was sighted on the riverbank side. On January 28, 2007 at 1215 hrs a group of six individuals was sighted at Nidoya Char. It appears that the Nidoya Char is a suitable foraging ground for this species, as this species was sighted only here everyday.

The Purbasthali-Ganga Islets is an unexplored waterbird habitat of West Bengal. It is estimated that the Purbasthali-Ganga Islets support at least 72 species of waterbirds and are ranked as a top priority list to be designated as a Ramsar Site (Vijayan *et al.* 2004). Recently, I recorded 101 species of waterbirds from the Purbasthali-Ganga Islets (Sharma 2007). It was found that this wetland area is suitable for Indian Skimmers also, where it may occur regularly.

REFERENCES

- ALLEN, D., J. ANDERTON & K. KAZMIERCZAK (1996): Report on an ornithological visit to Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India, February 17 to March 6, 1992. *Forktail*(12): 31-37.
- BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL (2007): Species factsheet: Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis*. Downloaded from <http://www.birdlife.org>.
- BOMBAY NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY (2007): Statewise Asian Waterfowl Report for 2003, 2004 and 2005. Downloaded from <http://www.bnhs.org>.
- JHA, S. (2006): Records of some rare birds from Farakka Barrage (West Bengal, India) *Indian Birds*, Vol: 2, No: 4. New Ornithology Foundation, Hyderabad.
- SHARMA, A. (2001): Birds of Farakka Barrage. *Environ.* 7(4&5).
- SHARMA, A. (2007): Waterbirds of Purbasthali-Ganges Islets, Burdwan district, West Bengal. *Indian Birds* (Submitted). New Ornithology Foundation, Hyderabad.
- VIJAYAN, V.S., S.N. PRASAD, L. VIJAYAN & S. MURALIDHARAN (2004): Inland Westlands of India-Conservation Priorities. Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Coimbatore.
- WETLANDS INTERNATIONAL (2002): Waterbird Population Estimates – Third Edition. Wetlands International Global Series 12, Wageningen, the Netherlands.

4. FIRST RECORD OF CASPIAN GULLS *LARUS CACHINNANS* IN THE INDIAN SUNDERBANS DELTA¹

ARUNAYAN SHARMA² AND CHRISTOPH ZÖCKLER³

¹Accepted July 30, 2007

²Centre for Ecological Engineering, Netaji Subhash Road, In front of T.O.P., Malda 732 101, West Bengal, India. Email: arunayan@gmail.com

³ArcCona Ecological Consulting, Cambridge CB3 0HY, United Kingdom. Email: cz@arccona.com

On January 24, 2005, we approached Halliday Island Sanctuary, located at the extreme end of the Indian Sunderbans delta near the Bay of Bengal coastline, which is a part of the Sunderbans Biosphere Reserve, to look for waders. The

survey was a part of an international ornithological expedition looking for the globally threatened Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus* (Zöckler *et al.* 2005). The Island is situated south-east of Kolkata in South 24 Parganas district,

West Bengal, India, a World Heritage Site (Project Tiger 2001).

While approaching the island, we noticed a group of gulls hovering above the waterline flying along our launch, the birds appeared to be following us. We arrived at the Halliday Island Sanctuary at c. 1245 hrs and began identifying and counting the waders present there. After completing the wader count we turned our attention to the gulls, which were still hovering above the waterline near the shoreline. After close observation from a distance of c. 200 m, through telescopes, we noticed there were fifteen gulls in the group of which nine were Caspian Gulls *Larus cachinnans*, five were Pallas's Gulls *Larus ichthyaetus* and one Sooty Gull *Larus hemprichii*. All the gulls were in their adult winter plumage (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Kazmierczak and van Perlo 2000; Couzens 2005; Ripley *et al.* 2005).

The plumage of the Caspian Gulls *Larus cachinnans* was recorded as: Overall appearance dark uniform brown and considerably smaller than the neighbouring Pallas's Gulls; head, nape and throat slightly brownish with a short whitish eyebrow. Underparts whitish. Mantle and wings brown. Wings dark brown with darker blackish primaries (did not show underparts). Through the telescope the bill looked heavy, quite slim with little gonydeal angle; moderate to steep curve to culmen. Head small and rounded, on a rather slim, graceful neck; impart a more delicate look (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Kazmierczak and van Perlo 2000; Ripley *et al.* 2005). However, other individuals of the same species on the island had yellow legs, gray back, slightly darker and more extensively black wing tips with a few white spots. A red spot on the bill and a red ring around the eye; orb ring red to orange-red in colour. Tail and rump white. Head white with variable fine streaks from eye to rear crown. Iris noticed dull gray-yellow to bright lemon. Bill colour bright to orange-yellow. Gonydeal spot large and red.

The breeding range of the Caspian Gull is concentrated on the Mediterranean Sea. In North Africa it is common, and in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia the population is known to

be increasing. Recently, breeding of this species in Libya and Egypt has been recorded. In the Middle East, a few breed in Israel and Syria with large numbers in Cyprus and Turkey. In Europe, there are colonies all along the Mediterranean coast and it also breeds on the west side of the Black Sea. The Caspian Gull is also common in the Canary Islands, Madeira Islands and the Azores. Many birds remain in the same area all year round, but others migrate to spend the winter in warmer areas of Western Europe or head southwards, as far as Senegal, the Gambia and the Red Sea. It is reported as a vagrant to north-eastern North America and Nigeria (BirdLife International 2007).

Caspian Gulls, a widespread winter visitor to the Indian subcontinent, have been recorded from various parts of India; but unfortunately the status of this species from India is uncertain and uncommon (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). Caspian Gull was not recorded from West Bengal as indicated in the range maps of this species (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Kazmierczak and van Perlo 2000). In the neighbouring country of Bangladesh it is a scarce winter visitor, mainly in the Bangladesh Sunderbans (Jhonson *et al.* 1992; Grimmett *et al.* 1998). We are sure that the species occurs in the Indian Sunderbans delta in considerable numbers and may have been overlooked. The recent sighting of Caspian Gulls from the Halliday Island Sanctuary is probably the first record of this species from the Indian Sunderbans delta and West Bengal, India.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge Mr. Mrinal Chatterjee and Mr. Debdas Bhakta of the Institute of Climbers & Nature Lovers, Anpur, Satjelia Island, Sunderbans for their cooperation and assistance and all the individuals who took us to the remote areas of the Indian Sunderbans delta for bird surveys and protected us while we counted waders in known tiger areas. Finally, we thank the German Manfred Hermsen Foundation, Bremen for generously funding the survey.

REFERENCES

- BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL (2007): Species factsheet: Caspian Gull Gull *Larus cachinnans*. Downloaded from <http://www.birdlife.org>. Birdlife International.
- COUZENS, D. (2005): Identifying Birds by Behaviour. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd. London. Pp. 118-130.
- GRIMMETT, R., C. INSKIPP & T. INSKIPP (1998): Birds of the Indian Subcontinent. Oxford University Press. Delhi. Pp. 503-508.
- JHONSON, D., P. THOMPSON & J. WOOLNER (1992): Birds of Bangladesh (Revised). University Press, Dhaka.
- KAZMIERCZAK, K. & B.V. VAN PERLO (2000): A Field Guide to the Birds of India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Maldives. Om Book Service, New Delhi. Pp. 128-131.
- PROJECT TIGER (2001): Project Tiger Status Report. Ministry of Environment and Forests. Government of India. New Delhi. Pp. 168-175.
- RIPLEY, S.D., P. RASMUSSEN & J.C. ANDERTON (2005): Birds of South Asia The Field Guide. 2 vols. Washington D.C. and Barcelona: Smithsonian Institution & Lynx Edicions.
- ZÖCKLER, C., S. BALACHANDRAN, G.C. BUNTING, M. FANCK, M. KASHIWAGI, E.G. LAPPO, G. MAHESWARAN, A. SHARMA, E.E. SYROECKOVSKI & K. WEBB (2005): The Indian Sunderbans: an important wintering site for Siberian waders. *Wader Study Group Bull.* 108: 42-46. International Wader Study Group.